“What is Required?”

Sermon: Micah 6:6-8 January 10, 2021

Micah 6:6-8 NRSV

**6**“With what shall I come before the Lord,
    and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
    with calves a year old?
**7**Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
    with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
    the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
**8**He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
    and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
    and to walk humbly with your God?

President Abraham Lincoln was once in a lengthy debate with a stubborn disputer. No matter how hard he tried, Lincoln could not persuade the man using truth and logic. Finally, he asked the man, "Well, let's see…how many legs does a cow have?"

"Four, of course," came the reply disgustedly.

"That's right," agreed Lincoln. "Now suppose you call the cow's tail a leg; how many legs would the cow have?"

"Why, five, of course," was the confident reply.

"Now, that's where you're wrong," said Lincoln. "Calling a cow's tail ‘a leg’, doesn't make it a leg."

Who here has heard the phrase, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet"? And who knows where that phrase comes from or what it means? It is from [William Shakespeare](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Shakespeare)'s play [*Romeo and Juliet*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romeo_and_Juliet), of course.

Juliet says these words to argue that it does not matter that Romeo is from her family's rival house of Montague, that is, that he is named "Montague". The reference is often used to imply that the names of things do not affect what they really are.

Similarly, in her 1913 poem, *Sacred Emily*, American novelist and poet, Gertrude Stein, coined this famous phrase… “A rose is a rose is a rose…”

-2-

Why all of this talk about “roses”, you might be asking? And what do quotes about roses have to do with the story about Abraham Lincoln and the 5-legged cow? The answer is…it is about calling things what they really are…speaking the truth even when it is unpopular.

Radio personality and author, Dave Weinbaum, said, “Being truthful when you know it will cost you, is the true test of honesty.”

You’re probably beginning to feel nervous and maybe even a little agitated. “What is our pastor going to say today? Can’t we just come to church and be entertained? Is she going to try to make us feel bad? Is she going to bring up politics? Why can’t she just leave politics out of the pulpit?”

Have one or more of these questions popped into your head already? If so, believe me, I get it. I really do. I had a sermon written and ready to go on Tuesday.

It was a sweet and simple sermon about the Baptism of Jesus, which is where we are in the lectionary this week. It was based on Mark 1:4-11, a passage we’ve all heard many times before.

It was easy to write and would have been very easy to preach this morning. Preaching on the Baptism of Jesus isn’t going to get me in hot water with anybody, right? Of course not. How could preaching on that beloved passage possibly get me into hot water?

No, I probably wouldn’t get into hot water with any of you. But can the same be said for everyone in our congregation? And what about the others who watch the recording of our worship services every Sunday? Not all of them are members of our church.

Yes, it would have been much easier for me to just go with the Baptism of Jesus sermon today and leave all of the ugliness of this past week hidden away on the back shelf.

There are times when a pastor has to step out onto a ledge and speak a word of truth because we, pastors, answer to more than just our congregations. We answer ultimately to God and when God puts a word on your heart, you cannot ignore it forever…no matter how much you might want to.

Do you know what I mean by that? Has God ever bugged you and bugged you and bugged you until you finally just had to give in??? That is exactly what happened to me on Thursday.

-3-

Ann and Sage Fuller (from FCCC) gave me a beautiful hand-painted wall hanging this past Sunday, which they had made for my birthday in March…when we were in lockdown due to the pandemic.

It has been laying against my living room wall all week as I’ve tried to figure out where to hang it. On it, painted in shades of purple, is a very simple message:

“Act justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly.” Micah 6:8

Every time I walked through my home on Wednesday evening and all day on Thursday, I saw that wall hanging leaning against the wall. And I heard the voice of God, which began as a whisper, saying, “Preach a different sermon.”

God can be awfully persistent. Just think of all the times throughout scripture when people have tried to ignore God’s voice. It never works. So, what began as a whisper, finally turned into a shout. “Preach a different sermon!!”

I finally threw my hands into the air and say, “Okay!!! I hear you! I’ll preach a different sermon!” You all know I’m not one of those fiery preachers who screams and shouts from the pulpit. That doesn’t fit with my personality and it isn’t my style.

Because of my love and respect for all of you, I will speak this word of truth, my truth, as gently, but as firmly, as I can. I pray that you will be able to hear what I have to say without jumping to conclusions before I have finished speaking.

I am not claiming to speak for God. I am speaking for me, with words that I believe God has placed upon my heart. Please don’t let the words or phrases that I use today trigger a reaction that makes you stop listening.

We are a family. And families sometimes have to talk about hard things. That is the only way they can grow and move forward together.

I am going to say a prayer now, before I go any further…

“O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight. For you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.”

Let’s deal with the elephant in the room, first and foremost. Let’s call it what it was. The attack on the U.S. Capitol Building on Wednesday was not a protest. It was an act of domestic terrorism. Can we all agree about that?

Five people lost their lives, including U.S. Capitol police officer, Brian Sicknick, who was killed trying to defend against those who stormed the building. Several more were injured.

-4-

The very seat of U.S. democracy, our Capitol Building, was violently breached and attacked by armed intruders. Regardless of the reasons behind this attack, regardless of who initiated it, or who may or may not have allowed it to happen, our Capitol Building was attacked by our own people.

These were not foreign terrorists. These were Americans. And in the wake of the attack, the flurry of blaming, name-calling, ugliness, finger-pointing, rationalizing, grandstanding, threats, and conspiracy theories has reached the level of insanity.

Brite Divinity School President, Rev. Dr. Newell Williams (who is an ordained Disciples of Christ minister), posted a prayer online yesterday. His prayer captures the horror of what happened on Wednesday.

He wrote, “Gracious God, we lament the deeply troubling events of this week. A mass of people, some proudly identifying themselves as white nationalists, carrying flags and banners, including the flag of the Confederate States of America and a banner stating that ‘Jesus Saves’, broke through police barricades and illegally entered the Capitol Building of the United States seemingly intent upon halting by intimidation the certification of the election of the President Elect.”

Later in his prayer, Rev. Williams writes, “The association of Jesus with these violent actions has also deepened the convictions of persons who believe that little or nothing good can come out of Christianity or other religious traditions.”

Let that sink in for just a moment. The association of Jesus with violence like what happened at the Capitol Building on Wednesday is just further proof for people who have no use for Christianity or other religions that nothing good can come from them.

Are we okay with that? Are we okay with people waving “Jesus Saves” banners as they violently break into our Capitol Building?

And what about the fact that these terrorists were carrying Confederate flags into the Capitol Building? News flash!!!! The South lost the Civil War. Confederate flags have no place in this country today, except maybe in history museums.

I can’t stand here and tell you how people of color feel when they see Confederate flags because I am white. I can sympathize with them. I can try to empathize with them. But, I cannot feel what they feel. So, I’ve tried to just listen.

Am I responsible for slavery? No, I’m not. This is a question that gets white people really riled up today. No, we are not responsible for the slavery that took place in our country in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries.

-5-

But, we ARE responsible for making sure it is neither glorified (such as displaying Confederate flags) or forgotten. We ARE responsible for doing everything we can to make our country a more just nation for ALL people…not just white people.

I’m not going to talk about “white privilege” today because I know some of you would react to hearing those words and would stop listening. That will be a conversation for another day…and I do mean a conversation, not a sermon. We must have dialogue if we ever hope to move forward together.

Before I say more, I want you to know that I didn’t just check one or two news sources when I wrote this sermon.

I watched CNN and ABC News. I also read a story on FOX News by Tucker Carlson in response to the attack on the Capitol Building.

Carlson said, “Political violence begets political violence. That is an iron law. We have to be against that, no matter who commits the violence or under what pretext, no matter how many self-interested demagogues assure us the violence is justified or necessary. We have a duty to oppose all of this, not simply because political violence kills other people's children, but because in the end it doesn't work.”

I didn’t just listen to what the Democrats said after the attack. Republican Senator, Tom Cotton, from Arkansas said, Capitol violence must be met with “the full force of the law”.

Regardless of who the attackers were, when they chose to violently storm our Capitol Building, U.S. democracy was under attack that day. We who love this country cannot condone or excuse such an act.

There has been a great deal of blaming, as well as justifying, how such an attack could happen. No matter who incited the attack, no matter who is responsible for the lack of preparedness, and no matter who did or did not call for a quick response to the attack---the bottom line is that there is plenty of blame to go around.

You all know the old adage, “Sticks and stones may break my bones…but words will never hurt me”, right? Well, broken bones do hurt. But, they eventually heal. Words can hurt for a lifetime. And even for generations to follow.

Words have power. They have the power to destroy and they have the power to heal. Words have the power to define us because what we say our loud mirrors what is in our hearts. And what we don’t say often speaks even louder than what we do say.

-6-

If we stand by silently, saying nothing about the attack on our Capitol Building, we are complicit because it was an act of domestic terrorism.

If we say nothing about white nationalists waving and displaying Confederate flags, we are complicit because it is a blatant act of racism.

When the Prophet Micah took the people of Israel to task, it was because of dishonesty in the marketplace and corruption in their government.

He warned the people, on behalf of God, of pending destruction if their ways and hearts were not changed. The people started to think that maybe Micah was speaking the truth and began to get worried.

“What do we do now?” they wondered. “How can we turn things around?”

Beginning with verse 6 in today’s passage, the people asked:

***6****“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?* ***7****Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”*

Isn’t there something we can do to make things better? What about all of these things we’re willing to offer to God, including our firstborn children---won’t that help?

Micah tells them God isn’t interested in their offerings. They’re way past that now. Listen one more time to what Micah says to them:

*“****8****He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”*

What does the Lord require of you? 1. To do or to seek justice…not only justice for those who look exactly like you or believe exactly like you…but justice for ALL of God’s children.

2. To love kindness and mercy...not only for those who look exactly like you or believe exactly like you…but kindness and mercy for ALL of God’s children.

3. And to walk humbly with God…humility is a character trait that is in short supply these days, wouldn’t you agree?

What does the Lord require of you…of me…of us? Not what does the Lord ***ask of*** ***us***…but what does the Lord REQUIRE of us but to seek justice, to love kindness and mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

-7-

These are the REQUIREMENTS for people of faith. They are the very foundation of who we are as followers of Christ. We are to seek justice for ALL of God’s children---to name injustice, radicalism, terrorism, racism, homophobia, sexism, ageism, and every other ism or phobia that separates us from one another.

And once we’ve named these things for what they truly are, we are REQUIRED to work tirelessly to make our world a more just place for ALL people…not just the ones who look exactly like us or believe exactly like we do.

The events of Wednesday are not over. What happened that day will have long lasting consequences for our country. There is a tremendous amount of work to do if we hope to ever be unified. It may even feel impossible right now. However, we as people of faith know that nothing is impossible with God. Nothing.

But, God can’t do it alone. I’m not saying God isn’t capable of doing it because we all know that God is capable of anything. What I’m saying is that true change must happen within a person’s heart first.

Until all hearts have been changed to see that we really are just one race…the human race…then real change won’t be possible.

What happened on Wednesday was a wake-up call for our country. What will you and I do about it now? If you’re not sure, go back and read Micah 6:8 and you’ll find your answer.

What does the Lord REQUIRE of us? What do you think? Amen.